

SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE

South Asia Institute aims to cultivate the art and culture of South Asia and its diaspora through local and global collaborations, curated exhibitions, innovative programs, and educational initiatives that aim to engage diverse communities. At the Institute, the common heritage and identity of South Asian Americans are showcased while celebrating the common connections and values that are shared with the universal community at large. Art and cultural expression bring together diverse peoples in a shared experience, resulting in a better understanding and greater tolerance for ethnic differences.

First generation immigrants from South Asia and longtime residents of Chicago, it was the passion for South Asian Art that inspired the founders, Shireen and Afzal Ahmad, to assemble one of the most significant collections of South Asian art in the United States over a period of 50+ years. The collection includes works ranging from early Moghul Miniatures to Modern and Contemporary masterpieces by artists from the region and the diaspora. Having enjoyed living with the works, it has always been their mission to share the collection on a much larger scale and promote South Asian Art and cultural heritage in the United States. It was with that goal in mind that they established the South Asia Institute which officially opened its doors in October 2019, just prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are strongly committed to their mission and continuously explore avenues to advance it in meaningful ways.

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Testimonies on Paper
at South Asia Institute, Chicago, IL.
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EXHIBITION GUIDE

TESTIMONIES
ON PAPER

Through the interwoven experiences of South Asian women and their work, the exhibition explores the many ways in which women artists have engaged with their cultures and societies in consequence of the representation of histories and myths of women's experiences historically. The exhibition *Testimonies on Paper: Art and Poetry of South Asian Women* brings together an array of works on paper by South Asian women artists from the Hundal Collection along with South Asian women poets to create a space for alternative narratives of femininity and identity as the poets respond to the works exhibited.

For the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, Art and Poetry: "...cannot do without one another. Yet the two words are far from being synonymous." For Maritain, "poetry is the intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self" and art "is the creative work-making activity of the human mind." The fact that art and poetry are distinct art forms enhances the importance of each form. Indeed, they mediate the sense of inspiration. The relationship between art and poetry exemplifies the intrinsic value of both art forms as they complement each other and contribute to the enrichment of culture.

The exhibition includes the selected works by artists Zarina Hashmi, Nasreen Mohamedi, Ayesha Sultana, Laila Rahman, Shahzia Sikander, Meher Afroz, Naiza Khan and Salima Hashmi; and the response of poets Mary Anne Mohanraj, Nina Sudhakar, Kashiana Singh, Dipika Mukherjee, Ami Kaye and Shikha Malaviya. The works incorporate various motifs, such as spirituality, mythologies, gender, displacement, and longing which reflect the artists' desire to make sense of their lives in the world around them.

The exhibition serves as a testament to the resilience and agency of navigating within, and against the constraints of the societies and cultures both in South Asia and outside of it. The physical and emotional attachment and detachment that is involuntary for those who leave but also for those who stay behind, no matter what the motivation is for doing it, involves confronting new situations and challenges throughout the process of separation, migration, relocation and adaptation to a new circumstance.

Andrea Moratino

When South Asians say *Desi*, we mean both *Home* and *Country*, a way of belonging to a geographical space that transcends the national boundaries of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka. We may eat different foods, name kinship ties in different tongues, yet we recognize the others as ourselves, rather like being reflected through a distorted carnival mirror, slightly changed but essentially the same. Our lands have been watered by the blood of partitions and communal strife, yet there is still a strong desi umbilical cord that unites us.

It has been an honor to be a part of this initiative featuring nine South Asian women artists from the Hundal Collection along with seven South Asian women poets. The featured poets may be diasporic, but are strongly rooted in the same South Asian ethos. They reshape geographic distance and reconfigure personal histories as they speak of anomie and freedom: "a woman / may give herself away, undiminished" (Mary Anne Mohanraj), "It is not about wearing (or not) a hijab or pullav, / but to lose one's head entirely for the freedom to choose" (Ami Kaye), "corpses keep smouldering long after they turn into ash" (Bhaswati Ghosh), "Every beast has a belly / & all of us here were still animals, once-conjured contours of swollen / desire" (Nina Sudhakar). Moving fluently and fluidly through languages, these poems flag cultural icons: "a map without a legend / a durbeen missing an eye" (Shikha Malaviya), "semazens dance their dervish, untethered, their floor a smooth wasli" (Kashiana Singh).

Shireen and Afzal, as well as the South Asia Institute team, have been indefatigable in promoting the vitality of South Asian art and cultural heritage in Chicago and the wider United States. The artworks presented to the poets—by artists Zarina Hashmi, Nasreen Mohamedi, Ayesha Sultana, Laila Rahman, Shahzia Sikander, Meher Afroz, Naiza Khan, Bani Abidi and Salima Hashmi—were truly inspirational. I have not lived through the Partition that made my family flee Bangladesh for West Bengal, but the current tensions in too many parts of our globalized world have been disturbing, so this opportunity to collaborate with artists across national borders was welcome indeed. Hilary Mantel, British author and twice-winner of the Booker Prize for historical fiction writes, "History makes fools of us, makes puppets of us, often enough. But it doesn't have to repeat itself... The pen is in our hands. A happy ending is ours to write."

May our pens and voices always collaborate, through brilliant initiatives like this, to write happier endings for our world.

Dipika Mukherjee



Zarina

Last Letter, 1991

Text printed in black on Arches Cover white paper and chine colle on Nepalese handmade paper
Edition of 2 of 10
16 1/2 x 29 1/2 inches (41.9 x 74.9 cm)
© Zarina; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

After The Goddess of Time Abandoned Us
by **Nina Sudhakar**

I became fused to potential futures, heritage of some unborn daughter, or else razored teeth cutting through

decades of distance. I felt the coming of a contagion, as if my body were gestating a fatal plague. I looked

inside myself & grew to worship the rage thickening my blood so that it mounted my heart & unfurled its

ribbons into the earth. I wanted to throw blades into the rifted past, feeling that this power, harnessed, could

outlast us all. I imagined, in the end, that the earth's core could be coaxed out of its sodden cave to see all that had

transpired in the name of the half-lives, bodies alive & presently decaying. Long after the descendants had left

the days to fester, begrudging the earth even a soft tilt to its rotation. What other end to a world built from all

bend & pillars of break? Every beast has a belly & all of us here were still animals, once-conjured contours of swollen

desire. I filled mine to loom large, to one day be an heirloom for myself, still yearning to gift the future some recognizable shape.

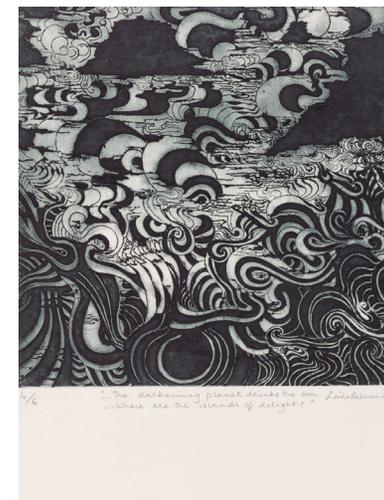
Homesick

by **Mary Anne Mohanraj**

The problem with going deep is that you can fall in. You find yourself reheating frozen food, a pale imitation of the real thing. Making other dishes over and over trying to remember decades-old cinnamon in the nose, lime on the tongue, chili heat lingering on your lips — a pain that you seek out repeatedly.

Sometimes you think your heart can't take it; it would be easier to order pizza instead. Who doesn't love melted cheese?

Yet here you are, microwaving frozen hoppers that you keep stashed in the basement deep freeze. Hoarded for those days when you need them, even if it hurts.



Laila Rahman

The darkening planet drinks the sun... where are the islands of delight..., 2014

Edition 4 of 6
9 x 8 in.